

The Need for Innovation in the National Strategy

For its annual Quality Counts in January 2006 Education Week asked several persons involved from the beginning with the strategy of standards-based systemic reform to comment, looking back after 15 years. Mike Smith, the principal author of the paper that launched the idea, wrote this; made this suggestion, looking forward.

(The strategy should) deliberately support experimentation in public school practices, choice, governance, and use of technology. The theory and practice of standards-based reform does not directly address the issues of stimulating innovation within the public system, or of safety valves for parents and students who would like an alternative to the standard public schools.

Two significant strategies address these issues. The first is the creation of charter schools and the development of small secondary schools in areas where they serve as an alternative to traditional large schools. Both charter and small schools typically offer choices to students, and stem from the widely held perception that many schools (particularly secondary schools) are too bureaucratized and impersonal to do a good job in teaching most students, especially those needing the most help.

Potentially, the two types of schools both provide the opportunity for competition in ideas and practice to the traditional systems and serve as incubators for new strategies. Though charters, on average, look a lot like regular public schools and have similar effects on student achievement, there are exceptions. In my view, the most important of the innovations that some charters have used has been to extend the time of schooling by significant amounts. Of course, the time has to be used well. The Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, for example, extends time by roughly 60 percent, and is realizing striking and powerful results on achievement working with poor and minority children across the country. The widespread use of such interventions would greatly enhance our chances of closing achievement gaps.

The other strategy involves the use of technology. The private sector began to realize productivity gains from technology 10 to 15 years ago. At first, technology improved only the work rate. Later, it spurred changes in the nature of the work itself. The use of technology by school systems and schools lags behind the private sector by about a decade. By that calculation, schools, which have already realized some gains in efficiency from technology in their central offices and in certain aspects of instruction, should be just about ready to realize productivity gains from using technology to actually change some of their work processes.

One of the more important recent advances has been in the way central-office, school, and student-level data are gathered, organized, delivered, and used. New data systems make it possible in large districts to track the allocation of resources, as well as student outcomes, on a real-time basis, and to make the data available throughout the schools. It is in the direct service of teaching and learning, however, that the most important advances are being seen.

oo

Marshall S. Smith was the acting deputy U.S. secretary of education for three years and the undersecretary of education for seven years in the Clinton administration. A former dean of the school of education at Stanford University, he has since 2001 been the program director for education at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, in Menlo Park, Calif.

Learn more about Education|Evolving's initiatives
and access its wide variety of publications at...

www.educationevolving.org

E|E's Web site describes—generally approves, and advocates—the quite radical changes now appearing in K-12 education. But, be aware that its perspectives do depart somewhat from conventional thinking.